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Conference Report on the Memory Studies Association Second Annual Conference

Copenhagen, 14-16 December 2017

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Attracting more than 600 attendees, featuring over 80 panels, five poster sessions, several film screenings, working group dinners, and workshops, the second Memory Studies Association (MSA) annual conference was much larger than the relatively cameral inaugural session in Amsterdam a year before. The 2017 event was also preceded by the MSA Forward one-day doctoral workshop, indicating the Association's intention to provide significant support for early career researchers through scholarships and mentoring. Rather than working towards unifying the field, the nascent MSA brings together researchers and practitioners working on memory-related themes, providing a multidisciplinary network, which the content of the conference program reflects.

The vast interest in memory (studies) was reflected in the use of the huge Bella Centre conference

venue for the opening discussion and keynote lecture. The panels and alternative formats were held on Copenhagen University's modern campus, a pleasant location, albeit one not entirely suited to the scale of the event. Hundreds of participants squeezed into narrow corridors for coffee breaks and dozens packed seminar rooms designed for much smaller numbers. The boom in membership and submissions since Amsterdam in 2016 brought the organizing team some understandable challenges but they ultimately coped admirably with the large number of participants and vast scale of the event.

With around ten parallel panels in each session, our report will necessarily be impressionistic. It works towards an outline of established and emerging trends in the field, while highlighting particularly interesting theoretical approaches and empirical studies that could inspire future research.

The opening roundtable on 'The Horizons of Memory Studies' featured ASTRID ERLI (Frankfurt), PACO FERRÁNDIZ (Madrid), CAROL GLUCK (Columbia) and PATRICK HUTTON (Vermont). There were further contributions in the form of pre-recorded videos by ALEIDA ASSMANN (Konstanz), SUSANNAH RADSTONE (Monash), and ANDREW HOSKINS (Glasgow), among others. Chaired by Jeffrey Olick, the panel explored existing methodological debates, objectives, and future perspectives for memory studies. Erll celebrated the field's interdisciplinary diversity and flexibility enabled by its dynamic grounding in travelling concepts, an argument Ferrándiz extended by calling for the inclusion of 'non-hegemonic epistemologies'. Gluck called for transcending 'date-stamped' traits that bind memory studies to twentieth-century traumas, or 'traumatology' as Olick termed it, given the emergence of new political challenges and complexities. Hutton's comments neatly summarized the MSA's rationale, noting that what had been dismissed as a "memory boom" has become established as a 'mnemonic turn', with intersections of past, present, and future a permanent feature of research, cultural production, and politics.

Failing to strike a chord across the disciplines: A disharmonious keynote?

The Conference's keynote lecture by MARIANNE HIRSCH (Columbia) on "Stateless Memories" opened the second day. She entangled her family's personal experience of statelessness and migration with a critique of 'nationalist' memory while arguing for the existence of an affective 'stateless aesthetic' and 'stateless imagination' that she presented on the basis of several artists' work. Hirsch stated that such works generate an effectively cosmopolitan 'iconography of statelessness', 'refusal', and 'resistance', presumably to nationalism and domination, regardless of the artists' – or audiences' – origins. While Hirsch's keynote clearly moved many in the audience, as evinced by their passionate comments in the Q&A, there was also a notably critical response to her lecture. Hirsch was challenged to explore her own privilege and that of artists presenting at, for example, the Venice Biennale. She was called upon to consider the relevance of her explorations to genuinely stateless individuals, while facing broader

critiques of her appropriation of the concept of statelessness for a talk where diaspora, homelessness or nomadism, familiar to cultural studies for some time now, would work more appropriately.

At a conference that in many respects advanced memory studies, calling into question prevailing paradigms while expanding methodological, conceptual, and disciplinary boundaries, Hirsch's keynote did not quite strike the same forward-looking chord.

Beyond a selective memory studies: Encounters with political science

Indicative of attempts to build cross-disciplinary dialogue was Panel 47, "What Political Science contributes to the Study of Memory", a panel discussion inspired by the sense that mutual ignorance has characterized relations between the fields. JENNIFER DIXON (Villanova) argued that memory studies' constructivist foundations combined with the concept of mnemonic agents could enrich the study of transitional justice in international relations. Similarly, CLÁUDIA TORIZ RAMOS (Porto) elaborated that memory studies can enrich political sciences through its diachronic work on identity formation. SARAH GENSBURGER (Nanterre) called for greater attention in public policy studies to questions of memory, including how state power seeks legitimacy, or loses it, through monuments and museums. ERIC LANGENBACHER (Georgetown) argued that political science methodologies could quantify the political effectiveness of memory work while also stressing that power struggles and contestation, rather than consensus, tend to characterize encounters between different groups' memories. ANNIKA BÖRKDAHL (Lund) likewise focused on the value of political science for addressing power dynamics in the struggle faced by some memory claims for legitimacy and visibility. This was also reflected in SARA DYBRIS MCQUAID'S (Aarhus) emphasis on understanding the transnational connectedness of institutional practices and structures.

Creating a coherent strand through the conference, Gensburger and McQuaid also chaired panels on Administrations of Memory (Panels 1 and 12), which found that the increasing institutionalization of collective memory since the 1990s had produced a mnemonic bureaucracy with shared practices of managing memory. However, it remains unclear whether these structures necessarily govern the past, with MARY McCARTHY (Des Moines) finding that "memory from below" could offer counter official memory in the context of the memory of comfort women in the United States. SARAH MADDISON (Melbourne), meanwhile, argued that politicized truth-telling practices are based in 'foundational conflict', where the apparent rectification of injustice can reinscribe hierarchies of power or silence unresolved conflicts. McQuaid's paper on the EU Peace Project in Northern Ireland illustrated this point, outlining a transnational memory project that ultimately makes no reference to the Holocaust, confounding expectations in (cultural) memory studies yet proving perfectly understandable to political scientists. LEA DAVID (Dublin/ Tel Aviv) adopted a more radically critical stance towards EU

memory projects, examining their tendency towards ‘securitization of memory’ as an ‘outsourced’ colonial project supplemented by the ideology of human rights. She found that political institutions’ values take precedence over victims and survivors of atrocities. A more affirmative take on transnationalized memory came with ANETTE HOMLONG STOREIDE’s (Trondheim) exploration of the translation of cosmopolitan tropes and practices into the Norwegian context in the form of the “Norwegian Anne Frank” Cissi Klein, for example, or through collaborations like the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

In (vain) pursuit of cosmopolitan memory: History, culture, and concepts beyond the nation

Panel 40, “Remembering the Second World War: Beyond the Nation”, underscored that War’s lasting centrality to memory studies and not only in relation to the Holocaust. This panel likewise commented on memory studies’ transnational turn, presenting research published in the eponymous volume edited by PATRICK FINNEY (Aberystwyth; Routledge, 2018). The four speakers considered large-scale concepts’ relevance to memory – empires, nations, artefacts, and the virtual. Finney addressed the ubiquity and vagueness of Michael Rothberg’s concept of ‘multidirectional memory’ while criticizing Britain’s failure to include imperial mobilization and post/colonialism in its dominant war memory. JEREMY HICKS (London) presented a case study of the victory banner that Soviet troops hung over the Reichstag, tracing its longer history as a relic with sacred value, thus making an important contribution to the significance of material culture for memory studies. BILL NIVEN (Nottingham, Trent Univ.) explored the transnationality of the concept of nation, noting the locatedness and particularity of memory cultures across Europe. He offered a valid critique of the cosmopolitan memory paradigm by drawing on the same kinds of popular cultural representations, such as films, television series, and tourist attractions that provided the foundations of Levy and Sznajder’s theory. EVA KINGSEPP (Karlstad) explored memory in the virtual realm, focusing on the interactivity and immersion, as well as the moral consequences, engendered by first-person shooter computer games, wondering if memory studies’ existing conceptual and methodological base is sufficient for engaging with a digital, interactive turn.

Panel 59, “The Holocaust Revisited”, offered further critical insights by analyzing popular cultural representations of the traumatic past. PASCALE BOS (Austin) reconsidered the chronology of Holocaust memory in the US. She noted how one of the first mass cultural encounters with the death camps came through ‘pulp’ magazines that as early as the late 1940s sexualized experiences in the camps. JASON HANSEN (Furman) addressed the virtual realm, focusing on ‘odd stories’ from YouTube, such as ‘Hitler vs Vader’ or the *Downfall* parodies, finding the institutionalization of well-funded Holocaust memory runs in parallel to its ‘desacralization’ as institutions’ hegemony over media and narrativizations of the past are loosened.

Further inspiration for reconsidering the dominant paradigms of cosmopolitan, multidirectional, and reconciliatory memory are emerging from the project outlined in Panel 75, “Agonistic Memory in Unrest”, a Europe-wide research consortium led by STEFAN BERGER (Bochum). It has already made public interventions through the Spanish theatre production *Where the Forest Grows Thick* (presented by FRANCISO FERRÁNDIZ, Madrid) and promises a thought-provoking exhibition exploring war as meaningful (“Krieg Macht Sinn”, presented by WULF KANSTEINER, Aarhus) in Essen later this year. Rather than seeing memory work as merely competitive or antagonistic, or, alternatively, as dialogic, consensual, and cosmopolitan, this project, as Berger outlined, focuses on ‘agonism’ as conceptualized by Chantal Mouffe, among others. It considers how memory and the past retain an open-ended ‘multi-perspectivity’, whether at particular sites of trauma, in family memory, or in public debates. Kansteiner also presented his arguments in a rousing talk in Panel 63 which asked “How to Keep Populists from Hijacking History”, resonating with debates from the opening roundtable. Calling for more agonism and less idealized cosmopolitanism, he stressed that media productions and populism ultimately reinforce each other through casual everyday racism. The ridiculing of populism in the ‘late-night comfort zone’ of left-liberalism merely reproduces that constituency’s established views, preventing encounters with different worldviews and thus precluding the instigation of relevant if difficult political debate.

Round numbers: Marking anniversaries

The packed calendar of centenaries ensured that the Russian Revolution and First World War were evident both in individual papers as well as full panels. BRIDGET KEOWN (Boston, MA) addressed questions of gender, identity, and trauma in WWI on Panel 32, while CLAIRE ELDRIDGE (Leeds) considered colonial entanglements with national memory in her paper “‘French’ Soldiers from Algeria and the First World War” on Panel 41. Transnational literary studies were represented in CHRISTINA SPITTEL’S (Canberra) paper, “The First World War in recent British, Australian and German Novels” as part of a Turbo Talk Session, an innovative format limiting papers to a few minutes to inspire lengthier informal discussion. Two full panels were dedicated to subjects related to the Great War: Panel 52, “Usable Past? The 100th Anniversary of the Russian Revolution: Meaning, Memory and Memory Politics” and Panel 78, “Recognition and Resentment: Experiences and Memories of the Great War in Belgium”. The latter was particularly insightful thanks to the variety of approaches and sources considered, which ranged from postage stamps as commemorative practices (CHANTAL KESTELOOT, Brussels) through attempts to address relations of cultural memory and sites of memory in Belgian fortified cities in 1914 (MYRTHEL VAN ETTERBEECK, Leuven; KARLA VANRAEPENBUSCH, Leuven) to psychological approaches drawing on the concept of flashbulb memory (OLIVIER LUMINET, Leuven) and sociological approaches applying questionnaire analysis (PIERRE BOUCHAT, Brussels). The

temporal and spatial locatedness of this panel enabled it to showcase the breadth of approaches to memory evident throughout the conference.

Towards a practical memory studies

The conference also featured many contributions that employed less traditional presentation styles and approaches, including artistic practice and environmental theories, such as LINDA LAPINA's (Roskilde) commentary on gentrification in Copenhagen "A Bench that Remembers" in Panel 39, or Panel 54, which explored 'environmental memory' and migration in the context of "Animals, Vegetation and Landscape in [sic] Agency" in Poland. Beyond panels and papers, the Conference also included workshop formats. One particularly relevant to early career researchers was the Career Advice Panel opening the third day. JULIE VIEBACH (Oxford), RURAMISAI CHARUMBIA (Bern), JULIE FEDOR (Melbourne), STEF CRAPS (Ghent), JEFFREY BLUSTEIN (New York City), JULIA CREET (York, Toronto) and CHRISTINA MORINA (Amsterdam) gave their perspectives on career opportunities in a field that cannot – yet – offer traditional academic posts. They retraced the paths that brought them into memory studies, openly addressing the challenges that dominated the audience's questions. The panelists all emphasized the importance of an academic grounding in a traditional discipline and using this as a point of departure for transcending disciplinary boundaries. Craps underlined the significance of generating visibility for your research by working on concepts, networking, and participating in relevant conferences. Chairing, JENNY WÜSTENBERG (York, Toronto) introduced the MSA's Mentoring Program, which should provide a structure for bringing through early career memory scholars.

The parallel Methodology Workshop involved group work led by several scholars on the *Monument to Denmark's International Efforts since 1948*. Multiple approaches for exploring the memorial were tested, from anthropological observation (PACO FERRÁNDIZ, Madrid) through a narrative-centered reading of Danish identity with CATHERINE GILBERT (Oxford) to a more radical eco-critical engagement with MATTHEW ALLEN (Leicester). While this open if time-pressed forum made clear the multidisciplinary and methodological variety that can enrich memory studies by initiating discussions across disciplinary boundaries, the seminar-room-based approach was ultimately not ideal for engaging with a large-scale outdoor memorial located within a broader complex that serves as a site of memory and as a place of recreation often oblivious to commemoration.

Highlighting memory studies' methodological ecumenism, the MSA Conference also sought to bring together researchers working on related themes, including memory and human rights, populism or colonialism, by organizing dinner groups. Whether the envisaged thematic working groups actually emerge from these encounters and whether they will reflect the full spectrum of scholars in the field,

from doctoral and early career researchers to lecturers and professors, remains to be seen as the cost of dinner proved prohibitively expensive for some participants.

The conference concluded with a showing of *The Look of Silence* together with a Q&A involving ANNETTE HILL (Lund) and the film's Copenhagen-based director JOSHUA OPPENHEIMER. The large lecture theatre was packed, with the audience of 300 or more spilling onto the stairs to witness this powerful testimony to the horror of individual and collective traumas that also gives a nod to hope, humor, and humanity. It was a fitting end to three days of inspirational exchanges and encounters.

The vastness and diversity of the conference underscored the vitality, heterogeneity, multidisciplinary, and ultimately productive diversity of memory studies – and memory itself. On a much smaller scale, the work and composition of Research Area 1 at the GCSC in Giessen reflects this diversity for which the MSA is constructing a dynamic institutional and transnational home. After all, the first conversations about forming a Memory Studies Association were held in Giessen (Jeffrey K. Olick, Aline Sierp and Jenny Wüstenberg: “The Memory Studies Association: Ambitions and an invitation”, *Memory Studies* 4 (2017), 490-494). The encounters and debates across and within disciplines will be continued in June 2019 in Madrid.

Link to Program: https://www.memorystudiesassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/MSA-Program-web_12_12.pdf

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